

Coming to America: the Latino impact

In *The Columbia History of Latinos in the United States Since 1960*, editor David G. Gutiérrez and 12 other authors examine issues faced by the Latino community in the United States during the last four decades of the 20th century. Using U.S. Census Bureau data, the contributors provide an indepth analysis of that community and the remarkable shifts which have occurred within it in terms of demography; patterns of immigration, migration, and exile; gender; culture; politics; and the dynamics of identity and social orientation. Thorough and extensive research has gone into these essays, and it shows.

The authors first highlight what they term the “exponential growth” of the Latino population in the United States. In 1960, per census data, 75 percent of all immigrants came to the United States from Europe and only about 14 percent from Latin America and Asia. By the end of the 20th century, those percentages had effectively reversed: in 2000, only 15 percent of the foreign-born population in the nation originated in the countries of Europe and the vast majority, upward of 77 percent, originated in the countries of Latin America and Asia. A compounding factor to consider is age: the current Latino population is significantly younger than the non-Latino population and consequently has a much higher proportion of individuals in their childbearing years. Thus, Latinos will continue to shape U.S. population growth even if immigration rates decline.

Professionals who have examined the 2000 census data note that more immigrants entered the United States between 1990 and 2000 than during any other 10-year period in history. They expressed surprise at both the breadth and depth of the transformation of the Hispanic-American population. Population growth of this magnitude has begun to affect the dispersion of Hispanics within the nation as well: recent census data indicate that Latinos



THE COLUMBIA HISTORY OF LATINOS
IN THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1960

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of all national origins, heritages, and class backgrounds can now be found in significant numbers throughout the country in a broad range of urban and rural settings, including in Alaska and Hawaii.

The immigrant population has simultaneously become more diverse. Although ethnic Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were the first to arrive, immigrants from Central America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and, more recently, South America are adding their numbers to the mix. The authors attribute these immigration patterns to the cumulative effect of a number of factors, chief among them economic and political instability in the regions from which these individuals come. They assess the influence these new Latin American immigrants have had on the large population of Latinos already living in the United States and note that native-born Latinos have a complex history as well.

The phenomenal growth in numbers and diversity of the Hispanic population led the authors to raise a couple of questions: Will the immigrants meld into American society in the manner most Americans like to think previous generations did? In light of their large numbers, many cultural differences, and close ties to their countries of origin, are they destined to change America in unfamiliar and potentially irrevocable ways? Many experts agree that these questions embody key political and social issues of the 21st century. They also believe that the experience of the past 50 years probably has raised more questions than it has answered.

One of the most perplexing issues having to do with the Latino population within the United States relates to the size and growth of this vibrant, increasingly wealthy community: given that Latinos are now the largest ethnic minority in the country, why do they remain so politically marginalized? The authors conclude that only a few intentionally exclude themselves from the political process. The majority, by contrast, have a desire to participate, but also feel excluded (in some cases, justifiably so) because of their immigrant status and demographic profile.

This book provides a number of arguing points for immigration law professionals and policymakers who support comprehensive immigration reform. It is especially relevant given the discussions about to begin in Congress regarding immigration reform legislation. As *The Washington Post* recently noted, “A genuine intellectual struggle appears to be taking place among Members of the House. Simply dismissing legalization as amnesty no longer works and the Congress has to do something to resolve the status of 11 million people. They know that people—voters—clearly want reform, including a path to citizenship.”

Gutiérrez provides a realistic and powerful interpretation of the Latino experience in America. This book is a must read for researchers, policymakers, community leaders, educators, and, indeed, anyone wishing to study the Latino experience and influence on American life. I recommend it strongly.